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East meets west: the reader response theory in thriller fictions

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Abstract

This comparative literature study focuses on the elements of Reader Response Theory (RRT) in thriller fictions between two outstanding American and Malaysian novelists, Sidney Sheldon and Ramlee Awang Murshid. Sheldon, one of the most famous American authors who wrote a lot of magnificent novels, whereas Ramlee is an established thriller fiction novelist in Malaysia. According to International Thriller Writers, a thriller is characterized by "the sudden rush of emotions, the excitement, and sense of suspense, apprehension, and exhilaration that drive the narrative, sometimes subtly with peaks and lulls, sometimes at a constant, breakneck pace." Therefore, this qualitative study aims to find the similarities and differences of both popular novelists from the view of RRT and how they managed to attract readers. From other point of views, the study also stresses on the elements of the concepts of "meaning" and "truth" in their literary works, in which are the main attractions to their avid readers and followers. Based on the findings, it is obvious that both authors implement different styles and figurative language to capture reader's thriller mood, in which it is extremely successful.

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Introduction

According to Harvey Chapman, a freelance writer, in his article 'Three Types of Novels', novels can be categorized in three main categories which are Genre fiction, the most popular variety of fiction. It can be divided into categories such as mysteries, thrillers, and romances. Next is Literary novels which are generally far less commercial than genre ones - but only generally. Lastly, the Mainstream fiction, sits more or less halfway between

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the other two. In fact, it is often defined in terms of how it differs to literary and genre novels. The best definition of mainstream fiction, though, is that it is a category in its own right. Meanwhile, Reader Response Theory encompasses various approaches to literature that explore and seek to explain the diversity (and often divergence) of readers' responses to literary works (Ross, 1998). In RRT, the role of a reader not only in giving meaning to the text but also considered the reader as a scholar who had the right and duty to stand in judgment on the text. All in all, RRT focuses on how and why a reader responds to a specific text in a specific manner and RRT also embraces the idea that one text can mean something vastly different to each reader. This theory has made literature to become more interesting to be read and analyzed.

As general, we can grab the idea that literature is related with words, sentence and emotion. According to Malaysian national laureate, Shahnnon Ahmad, he defined novel as “using background setting such as time, place, occupations, being together with nature and surroundings, the ideas were brought alive to be revamped into a complete story, given ups and down events as known as plots, brought up by what we called as characters and sometimes both of these are complex. That is what we called as novel” (Ganakumaran, 2007). While Rozlan Mohamed Noor (2009), stated that novel is a type of long composition that illustrates fictional characters that involves in chains of events in certain place and time settings. While it is much simpler form, short story, it has same function but focus primarily on one single conflict or problem that must be solved quickly.

Statement of Problem

Thriller novels in Malaysia nowadays have become popular as they go in line with other genre novels. There are demands for this genre novels as the readers are interested either Malay thriller novels or English thriller novels. But, the number for Malay thriller novels is not as much as English thriller novels. And so far, the only well-known Malay thriller novel writer is Ramlee Awang Murshid while for the English thriller writers, there are quite a lot of them, for this purpose of study only Sheldo's novels will take into consideration due to time constraints and the researcher's choice. Other than that, the demand for English thriller novels is also much higher than the Malay. Therefore, the problem that was examined in this research was to investigate the differences between Malay thriller novels and English thriller novels and why there are differences. This research is also aim to investigate the characteristics of both genre novels. The study is not only focused on the linguistic elements of the novels but also the elements of culture and sociolinguistics from the views of east and west.

Purpose of study

This qualitative research is specifically to investigate the differences between Malay thriller novels and English thriller novels which representing east and west, identify the characteristics of both thriller novels and find out the style and language used by both thriller novel writers and the causes of the varieties. The researchers use the Reader Response Theory approach in analyzing the novels and present in a qualitative design based on the matrix of the theory. The researchers will analyze these four novels based on one of the literature analysis theories which is Reader Response Theory or also known as Reader Response Theory (RRT). The RRT is not a subjective, impressionistic free-for-all, nor a legitimizing of all half-baked, arbitrary, personal comments on literary works. Instead, it is a school of criticism which emerged in the 1970s, focused on finding meaning in the act of reading itself and examining the ways individual readers or communities of readers experience texts. (Delahoyde, 2011). While Supryia and (1998) stated that reader-response criticism encompasses various approaches to literature that explore and seek to explain the diversity (and often divergence) of readers' responses to literary works.

Literature Review

According to Pradl (1996), the major purpose of learning literature is for enjoyment; without that, it is unlikely that readers will achieve any secondary benefits from a literary work. Recognizing that literary enjoyment leads to the development of an educated imagination and there is no single meaning or right interpretation of a literary work and this recognizing that such resources cannot provide adequate background information to deal adequately with sensitive issues. Sometimes people need to learn back what we were taught to make sure that our consideration of the world is more comprehensive, more multicultural, and gender-fair.

The thriller definition can be derived from many perspectives. According to Cyprus (2000) in her article entitled 'What is thriller fiction?' Thriller fiction is basically any type of short story, play, teleplay, film or novel that is suspenseful in its nature. The thriller genre includes many sub-genres, such as crime, spy, legal, medical and psychological. Thrillers typically involve a hero or heroine battling a villain or villains in order to achieve a goal, either to rescue someone or find the truth about something.

Discussion and Findings

In this research, the researchers will analyze these four novels based on one of the literature analysis theories which is Reader Response Theory not a subjective, impressionistic free-for-all, nor a legitimizing of all half-baked, arbitrary, personal comments on literary works. Instead, it is a school of criticism which emerged in the 1970s, focused on finding meaning in the act of reading itself and examining the ways individual readers or communities of readers experience text (Delahoyde, 2011). While Murfin and Ray (1998), stated that reader-response criticism encompasses various approaches to literature that explore and seek to explain the diversity (and often divergence) of readers' responses to literary works.

This theory was initiated by Stanley Fish in 1960 and still being discussed until today. McManus (1998), stated that in the reader-response critical approach, the primary focus falls on the reader and the process of reading rather than on the author or the text. She did also mention the theoretical assumptions which the literary text possesses no fixed and final meaning or value; there is no one "correct" meaning. Literary meaning and value are 'transactional' and 'dialogic', created by the interaction of the reader and the text.

There are several aspects that the researchers qualitatively analyze for this study. The first aspect is the main theme for these novels. Theme can be explained as the central idea or ideas explored by a literary work (Wiehardt, 1998). Next aspect is the moral value which can be found from for all four novels. While another aspect is language used in these four novels. Lastly, style used by the writers in their novels.

Thriller Novels from West

Cyprus (2000) mentioned that thrillers typically involve a hero or heroine battling a villain or villains in order to achieve a goal, rescue someone or find the truth about something. A fast pace, exciting plot and a building up of tension are the key requirements of riveting thriller fiction. Like the mystery genre, the audience of thrillers should be always being left wondering what will happen next. Different from mystery fiction, the reader or viewer may know exactly who the murderer or villain is, and maybe even right from the beginning of the story. In thriller fiction, the antagonist may be extremely evil, such as in a horror film, but still in most cases this villain is not supernatural. Rather, the villains fit with their sub-genres, such as a seemingly soulless or remorseless lawyer in legal thriller fiction. The plot revolves around a battle between the villain and the hero of the story. Since the pace must be fast in thrillers to keep the story exciting for readers or viewers, the action in this type of genre is often nonstop.

Thrillers also may or may not contain a lot of physical action such as car chases, fights and the like. Unlike action-adventure, the tone of thrillers is usually more poignant, psychological or even melodramatic in that the excitement can be emotional rather than physical. For instance, in a crime thriller, the villain may be a murderer playing a "cat and mouse" game with the hero who is the police detective trying to catch him. A certain tension can often be felt when watching film or television thriller fiction. Similarly, readers of a well-written thriller novel may feel unable to put the book down due to anticipation about wanting to know what will happen next in the plot. For example, in a medical thriller, doctors may be battling the effects of a plague released by bio-terrorists to stop the virus from spreading before it's too late and people die. In some especially suspenseful thriller fiction, there are several plot twists that totally change what viewers may expect to occur before a resolved ending takes place.

Fox (2000) New York Times journalist, mentioned that Mr. Sheldon was considered a master storyteller whose novels were known for their meticulous research, swift pacing, lush settings and cliffhanging chapters. A Sidney Sheldon novel typically and usually contains one or many more, of these ingredients: shockingly beautiful women, square-jawed heroes and fiendish villains; fame, fortune and intrigue; penthouses, villas and the jet travel these entail; plutonium, diamonds and a touch of botulism; rape, sodomy, murder and suicide; mysterious accidents and mysterious disappearances; an heiress or two; skeletons in lavishly appointed closets; shadowy international cartels, communists and lawyers; globe-trotting ambassadors, supermodels and very bad dogs; forced marriages and amnesia; naked ambition and nakedness in general and a great deal of vengeance. In an interview on September 29, 1997, Sidney was asked about how he made his books irresistible.

Thriller Novels from East

Muhd Nasruddin Dasuki (2000), a Malay writer, in his article, 'Ciri-Ciri Yang Perlu Ada Dalam Novel Thriller' (Characteristics of Thriller Novels) stated that there are several aspects that a Malay thriller novel should have. Among them are mystery, suspense, and fast pacing storyline. He added more that mystery is like a must for the novel of this genre. Mystery is like a magnet to attract the readers to find out what will happen next. There are a lot of incidents that would create mystery such as killings, kidnappings, robberies and others. The main key is how the writer writes up the whole story. Next aspect which is mentioned in his article is suspense, also important as without it, there is no mystery. Every event in the story would create curiosity among the readers and this curiosity that would lead the reader to read until the last chapter to answer their questions. Nasruddin also highlighted the last aspect as fast pacing storyline. Reading the thriller fiction should lead the readers to fast pacing mystery story rather than melancholic. The story technique must be fast and the wording must not be too long to read. It should be short, precise but full with contents. The duration of storyline must also not take a very long time. Usually it will take time within hours or few days.

Hajah Farhana Tarmudi (2013) stated in her article, 'Watak novel menjelma' (The appearance of character in novels) that Ramlee has his own unique style in creating his masterpiece to attract the reader interest to go on with the next chapter after another. Ramlee has a vast knowledge and experience in using story telling techniques in film scripts and drama as he used to produce script for radio drama from 1986 to 1993. So, he applied this knowledge and experience into producing his own novels. Other than that, for the introduction part for each novel, a story with suspense element will be used or 'bomb' technique to attract the reader's interest. Other than that, he also added motivational value in each of his masterpiece. She added more; Ramlee also interested in John Grisham's books entitled "The Testament and The Firm" and also likes to read newspapers every day. All 24 of his novels are full with facts that related with the plot of his stories to invite the readers to think and not only just to read.

Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD)

Since RRT allows for inferences and insights by the reader and accepts that a reader's background knowledge and experiences impact his/her interpretation of a text, the researchers found that the element of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) is very obvious and important practiced by both novelists. Although there are arguments and

discussion among the experts on what is the actual cause of this disorder, these two writers create their own specific causes for their characters. As in Sidney's novel, after Ashley Patterson was released by the court from the murder crime as she was diagnosed with MPD, she was admitted to the Connecticut Psychiatric Hospital. There, the cause of her 'illness' was found. She was diagnosed as having trauma during her early childhood, which is a sexual and emotional abuse by her father during she was 8 years old. In the novel, page 304, it was illustrated that Ashley saw a vision, a fragment of her past event when she saw her father lifting a young girl. It caused her to hysterical then after this, her second alter personality emerged and told the true story of how she and Alette was born. This type of MPD cause used by Sidney is coherent with what Kimball Johnson MD mentioned which is it cause by severe trauma during early childhood, usually extreme, repetitive physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.

While for Ramlee, he used amnesia or lost memory as the cause of Multiple Personality Disorder occurrence in his main character which is Norman. Differ from Ashley who undergo an intensive care of complete rehabilitation, Norman did get psychiatric help but Dr Asmah only manage to deduce that Norman had amnesia because he did not remember anything from his past and he did not continue his therapy session. Norman only know the truth about himself when he met all his alter personalities as stated in page 409, as if he was dreaming, one by one his personality came, starting from Amran, the actual main character that 'lost' inside himself, Bogart, Norman and Carlos. They explained their origin throughout his life. Then somehow, these personalities that appeared as video image, combined and slipped into his physical body resulting a complete identity of who they are. A young boy who originally as named Amran, become himself once again but with the additional characters from his personalities.

Conclusion

Sheldon did not clearly stated the starting of his chapter as a flashback. He also just put a paragraph and Italic fonts. This is his favourite style. From the reader's view, he might want his readers to guess on their own and explore themselves about the story inside his novels.

While for the Malay writer, Ramlee Awang Murshid, he uses a clear cut flashback in these two of his novels. For example, in his 'Mandatori' novel, in the first chapter, he inserted the date, the day and the place and give illusion as it today. But, the researcher found out that even though he uses this technique which will create a boring feeling, he kept bringing the readers to today's settings, then suddenly flashback in the past and then back to the future where the current setting. He might also go for future time setting. For example, in 'Mandatori', as mentioned above, he started at the first chapter as today, which is present, then second chapter, 13 years ago, the third chapter, different date but mentioned as today while on the fourth chapter, suddenly he started with this sentence, '25 tahun, selepas hari ini...' which meaning as '25 years, after today...'.

However, both of the writers, Sheldon and Ramlee Awang Murshid, shared another style in writings; which is both of them use factual information in their novels. Firstly Sidney Sheldon, in his novel 'Tell Me Your Dreams' is full with information on Multiple Personality Disorder and the views from the experts in the field. Even at the earlier before the first page, he did wrote, 'This is a work of fiction based on actual cases.' Another proof that he uses factual information is when Dr Salem made a statement about MPD. This was clearly not a fictional statement.

To conclude all, both Ramlee Awang Murshid and Sidney Sheldon share a lot of similarities. In term of theme of their novels, among four of their novels, two share a same theme which are 'Tell Me Your Dreams' and 'Mandatori'. two of their novels share a same single theme which is about Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). While for the moral values of love and justice, 'Nothing Last Forever', and 'Fiksyen 302' share the similarities. Reader Response Theory allows for a reader to respond differently to a text each and every time he/she reads the text. The other similarities that Sidney Sheldon and Ramlee Awang Murshid shared are both of them used flashback in their novels, used detailed description and applied factual information.

Whereas, for the differences that Sidney and Ramlee have is both of these writers were influence by their culture and religious belief in their places. Sidney Sheldon with Western culture while Ramlee was more towards East culture, specifically, Islamic culture. The other significant different was Sidney Sheldon tends to use woman as his main characters and he also somehow have a great respect over woman and female. He also seems want to change the perception on women as they are not weak, dependent on man and also especially, they are not solely the sexual objects for men. This correlates with the interview with Sidney Sheldon which he looks upon the female and women. While for Ramlee Awang Murshid, he seems prefer to use motivational advices in his novels and Islamic messages. This also support the way he get inspiration, which is trough praying and Doa. All in all, east and west can meet and share their literary ideas and produce a better piece of literature.

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